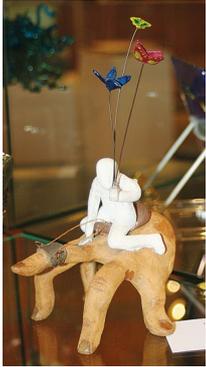


Mature Beyond Their Years: The Quad City Arts High School Invitational, Through May 19

Written by Michelle Garrison
Wednesday, 27 April 2011 05:01



The 34th-annual Quad City Arts High School Invitational features 197 artworks, and that's a lot. But the technical ability on display is exciting, particularly if one imagines the work these high-school students might create as they mature.

As a middle-school art teacher, I'm familiar with the long process of artistic development. During high school, students who put in the practice can draw with line realistically and understand composition and visual elements. Getting students to the point where they can draw an accurate still life, or mix the correct paint hues for a portrait, however, is a milestone in itself. And young people who can not only achieve technical fluency but begin to apply a consistent visual style, and express ideas and tone, are generally in the extreme minority. Although all students in this show should take pride in their exceptional work, only about a quarter of the students have reached this even higher level.

This exhibit, running through May 19 at the Quad City Arts gallery at 1715 Second Avenue Rock Island, presents work from high-school students selected by their teachers, who are invited to display their work as well. Fourteen schools – from Rock Island, Henry, Scott, and Muscatine counties – participated. Besides providing the opportunity to display and sell in a professional venue, the exhibition hands out more than \$2,000 in awards and scholarships, donated by community stakeholders.

Three-dimensional work represents the largest portion of media present, with 52 student works, including sculpture, ceramics, and jewelry. With this age of artist, sculpture projects tend to produce the most imaginative work. When freed from the worry of being realistic – and working with new, and therefore exciting, media – students often approach sculpture in a more adventurous way. About three quarters of the sculptural works present capture this expressive

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quality.

A sculpture that inspires contemplation is Bettendorf junior Corrin Roswell's whimsical untitled ceramic figure. Its size of about 10 inches tall gives it an initially subtle impact, emphasized by the airy composition created through voids and negative space. But the surreal content demands further inspection: a hand, posed like a walking animal, with a harness around the middle finger "neck." Holding the reins is a smooth, featureless, pure-white figure on a saddle poised on the back of the hand. In that figure's other hand is a bouquet of color butterflies attached to strings, as one would expect to see balloons. The disembodied hand and the captive butterflies add a vaguely dark element. The use of matte glaze creates an earthy, unassuming feel, and Roswell's use of post-fire materials (the string of the reins and the wire for the butterfly strings) makes this strange scene seem more plausible.



A ceramic work made with strong technique is *Stick Teapot*, by Moline High School senior Anthony Ceurvorst. This tea set appears to have been wheel-thrown, then carefully pushed inward to form four even, symmetrical indentations on each piece. The finish is a simple white glaze with subtle gloss. What makes this more than an ordinary teapot is Ceurvorst's sculpting of sticks for the handles and spout, and an acorn for the pull on the pot's lid. The surface treatment of varying browns adds to the illusion, suggesting real branches.

Stick Teapot

is an appealing blend of precise technique with a touch of style.

Drawing is the next most represented media, with 30 works. A large majority of this component of the show demonstrates strong realistic technique through portraits and still lifes but lacks a mature development of style. This seems to be reflective of art-course scheduling in schools; drawing classes are usually populated by underclassmen, while older students prevail in the painting, sculpture, and computer-art classes. Drawing classes also seem to focus on learning realistic technique – a necessary skill, but it's difficult for fledgling artists to incorporate ideas and concepts into their lifelike images.

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The students applying drawing materials to mixed-media pieces, however, demonstrate both technical and expressive skill. An example of a promising visual style is *Self in Space* by Travis Tomlinson, a senior from Moline. About eight by 12 inches, this image gives the viewer a lot to see. To the right of the composition is a frowning man, face slightly turned. He is wearing a futuristic space suit, with inscrutable words, symbols, and lines appearing on the face shield of the helmet, and the man's face itself. These symbols draw us in to inspect the man, and separate him from the complex background, as we puzzle over their meaning. The composition seems to have captured a brief, still moment in time, emphasizing the narrative quality of the image. The blend of watery and thick acrylics, with marker to accentuate the linear elements, recalls digitally painted concept art for a movie or game. Tomlinson shows us a snippet of an implied story, leaving the viewer to decipher the rest.



Senior Erin Johnson, from Pleasant Valley High School, presents another acrylic and marker mix with stylistic flair in her lighthearted work *Impugnable*. This canvas, about two feet squared, shows two pug dogs centered on a background of overlapping, vertical brushstrokes in shades of green. The dog on the right is larger, on two legs, and turning to look over his shoulder at the viewer, while the dog on the left is much smaller, and standing on all fours. Their fur is mottled, watery gray, brown, and yellow paint, with splatches and drips overlapped by black marker

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hatching. In contrast, their vibrant blue eyes are cleanly rendered and stare, begging, at the viewer. The dogs' proportions are simplified and cartoonish, with tiny pointed forms for legs. Their expressions make the viewer feel both endeared and implored – an experience many pet owners know. The visual style is compelling, with the messy paint drips contrasted against clean marker lines and the cartoony appearance. The placement of the emotive dogs with no background context also suggests an open-ended tale.



The exhibition's paintings show some of the most impressive technique, especially in the still-life genre. Moline and Bettendorf high schools especially present exceptional oil painters working in a realistic style. Immediately eye-catching is Katie Whiteman's triptych *Centennial Bridge*. The sheer ambition of a high-schooler tackling three two-foot-square canvases for a single image is impressive, but pulling it off with correct perspective and proportions, dramatic lighting, and expressive color is to be applauded. This picture of the bridge depicts a light blue at the top of the sky fading to a dark purple-blue at the horizon. The lights of Davenport, and on the bridge itself, twinkle in yellow, and reflect a deep orange into the Mississippi. Whiteman added interest to the sky with cross-hatching brushstrokes, and gave the lights extra twinkle by scratching away paint in energetic scribbles around their perimeters. This dramatic yet familiar scene employs strong expressive realism.



An equally ambitious oil painting is *Brothers*, by Moline senior Nick Lennon. This canvas, about five by three and a half feet, shows a guitar and drum set, with a stretched canvas in the background, all viewed from just above floor level. The perspective challenges presented by this unusual angle, coupled with the lines of the drum kit's hardware, were handled well by Lennon. The proportions and colors are true-to life, but with the feathery feel of a brush-stroked and layered painting. The title, as well as the objects included in the composition, add some thought

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to this still life. The viewer wonders if this is a familial narrative about brothers jamming in a basement, or a more metaphorical relationship.



Using paint on canvas in a completely different way, Davenport Central's Samantha Chavez creates detailed and stylized characters engaged in a visual joke with her acrylic piece *What's for Lunch – Triptych*

. These three canvases, each about two by one and a half feet, contain anthropomorphic, cartoonish animals. The left panel features a moose/octopus holding a cow taco; the center panel has a winged rodent chewing a crustacean sandwich; and the right panel includes an elephant holding a peanut bearing a child's face. The vibrant color scheme adds to the animated flair, featuring saturated purples, pinks, blues, and oranges, and the precisely repeating zigzagged, spotted, and striped backgrounds are the equivalent of a visual shout. Chavez's repetition of color, and her use of bold, simple shapes with flat colors, balance the craziness to create a fun feel. Despite the simplicity of silhouette, each animal has tidbits of detail – such as the bracelet on the elephant and the layered shirts on the octopus. The use of acrylic is clean and impeccable, with not a single errant brushstroke, and the character design shows a finger on the pulse of contemporary illustration.

There are standout works in other media, as well. Rose Couch, from Wilton High School, shows a delicate and ethereal monoprint of a giraffe – its silhouette filled with swooshing layered strokes of ink. Ben Steckel of Davenport Central represents a heavily abstract approach with his chunky, scratchy acrylic painting *Bad Moon*. Jacob Leyhe, also from Central, offers a haunting sepia photograph of people descending a spiral staircase with *Downward Spiral*.

There aren't many chances for high-school artists to get their work seen outside of the classroom. The teens in this show have seized this opportunity with work that is – almost universally – excellent for high-school students. And the best pieces would be great for nearly any artist.

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